

Eating habits are formed during the early childhood years and may last a lifetime. Good eating habits do not just happen; they must be learned. All parents and child-care providers can support positive eating habits. Presenting children with a variety of nutritious foods and limiting their access to low-nutrient foods can help them learn to make nutritionally sound food choices.

General Feeding Tips

Be sensitive to children's needs

- Try to understand each child's personality and reactions to food.
- Serve age-appropriate portions.
- Use child-sized tables, chairs, glasses, silverware, and serving utensils that young children can handle.

Help children feel ready to eat

- Provide a short transition time between activities and mealtimes.
- Tell children a few minutes ahead of time that it will soon be time to eat. This helps them slow down and get ready.
- Provide some activities that will help them slow down, such as: coloring or drawing; listening to soft music; reading a story; and having the children wash their hands.



Get children interested and involved

- Encourage children to participate in mealtime. With your careful supervision, invite them to help with: setting the table; bringing food to the table; and clearing and cleaning the table after eating.
- Before the children sit down at the table, discuss the foods that will be served.
- Encourage children to do as much as possible for themselves.
- Initiate nutrition education activities.

Make eating a pleasure

- Serve meals in a bright and attractive room.
- Select and arrange food on plates in ways that make meals interesting and attractive.
- To make meals interesting, include a variety of colors, flavors, textures, and shapes. Differences in temperature can also add interest — for example, crisp, cool, raw vegetables can be a nice contrast to warm soup.
- Set a good example. Eat at the table with the children and encourage conversation. Invite the children to talk about their food experiences and how the food tastes and smells.

Foster positive feelings

- Allow children to leave food on their plates. They may learn to overeat if they are told to finish their meals or clean their plates.
- Plan plenty of time to allow children to eat without feeling rushed.
- Avoid allowing children to use food to gain special attention and never use food as a reward or punishment.

Follow the Food Guide Pyramid

The USDA adapted the original Food Guide Pyramid to provide special guidance for young children aged 2 to 6 years old. Like the traditional Pyramid, the Pyramid for Young Children is an outline of foods to eat each day based



on the Dietary Guidelines. It similarly promotes balanced meals, moderation, and a variety of food choices.

- The Guide recommends these daily servings for young children: 2 milk group; 2 meat group; 2 fruit group; 3 vegetable group; and 6 grain group.
- 2- to 3-year old children need the same number of servings as 4- to 6-year old children but may need smaller portions, about 2/3 of a serving (except for milk).

Tips for Feeding Infants

Avoid giving infants foods that you do not want them to love when they get older. Occasionally feeding infants fast foods and sweets is fine, but serving these foods on a regular basis can make them strong favorites that will be hard for children to eliminate later in life.

Provide variety and repetition of food to keep meals interesting. By doing this, you will get infants used to the foods you want them to accept.

Make mealtime relaxed and enjoyable. At this age, mealtimes may take 45 minutes or longer. The more relaxed and cheerful the atmosphere, the more quickly foods will get eaten. Offer small portions, use a soft baby spoon, and wait until the child finishes each mouthful before offering more. Do not overfill the spoon to try and speed things up.

Tips for Feeding Toddlers

Offer new foods frequently since toddlers may need to see a new food offered 6 to 12 times before they will decide to like it. Once children have accepted a food, continue to offer it so the food will remain familiar.

Let children know they do not have to eat foods they do not want. This attitude will help children feel comfortable when trying new foods.

While children know how much they need to eat, parents and child care providers are the “gatekeepers” who decide which foods to offer and when meals and snacks will be served. If nutritious foods are served, toddlers can’t go wrong in what they choose to eat.

Good foods to try are: fresh fruits and vegetables; breads, crackers, low-sugar cereals, pasta, potatoes, rice, tortillas, and cooked grains; meats, poultry and fish; dairy products including milk, eggs, yogurt, and cheese; beans and peas; and foods with small amounts of spices and herbs.

Don’t serve large amounts of juice. It may fill up the child and take the place of other needed nutrients.

Don’t serve items that contain too much sugar. You can lessen a child’s sweet tooth by keeping sugar to a minimum. Store sweets out of sight. What children cannot see, they probably will not ask for.

Tips for Feeding Preschoolers

Preschoolers’ eating habits may be erratic. They may be too busy and active to want to sit and eat. Their rate of growth is slowing down, so they may eat less food. They may simply talk throughout the entire meal and forget to eat.

They are establishing food preferences. They know what they like and don’t like. Be sure to pave the way for good habits in the future by providing healthy meals and snacks.

They may enjoy learning about food. There are many ways to spark children’s interest in food. Some suggestions:

- Discuss different foods with the children.
- Mix nutrition information in with reading, story telling, and other activities.
- Allow the children to have input on what is served.

- With proper supervision, let the children help prepare food items for a meal.
- Select books and videos for the children that send good nutrition messages about food.

For More Information

The content for this brochure was taken from “Making Nutrition Count for Children,” a guide created by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Child and Adult Care Food Program. To access the entire guide, including fun food activities and information on the Food Guide Pyramid for Young Children, visit

www.fns.usda.gov/tn/resources/nutritioncount.html

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Encouraging Good Eating Habits in Early Childhood

A Guide for Parents and Child Care Givers

